Altehenger, Jennifer. "Social Imperialism and Mao's Three Worlds: Deng Xiaoping's Speech at the UN General Assembly, 1974." *Revolutionary Moments: Reading Revolutionary Texts*. Ed. Rachel Hammersley. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 175–182. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474252669.0028>>.

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Social Imperialism and Mao's Three Worlds: Deng Xiaoping's Speech at the UN General Assembly, 1974

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At present, the international situation is most favourable to the developing countries and the peoples of the world. More and more, the old order based on colonialism, imperialism and hegemonism is being undermined and shaken to its foundations. International relations are changing drastically. The whole world is in turbulence and unrest. The situation is one of 'great disorder under heaven,' as we Chinese put it. This 'disorder' is a manifestation of the sharpening of all the basic contradictions in the contemporary world. It is accelerating the disintegration and decline of the decadent reactionary forces and stimulating the awakening and growth of the new emerging forces of the people.

In this situation of 'great disorder under heaven,' all the political forces in the world have undergone drastic division and realignment through prolonged trials of strength and struggle. A large number of Asian, African and Latin American countries have achieved independence one after another and they are playing an ever greater role in international affairs. As a result of the emergence of social-imperialism, the socialist camp which existed for a time after World War II is no longer in existence. Owing to the law of the uneven development of capitalism, the Western imperialist bloc, too, is disintegrating. Judging from the changes in international relations, the world today actually consists of three parts, or three worlds, that are both interconnected and in contradiction to one another. The United States and the Soviet Union make up the First World. The developing countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and other regions make up the Third World. The developed countries between the two make up the Second World.

On 10 April 1974, Deng Xiaoping, vice-premier of the People's Republic of China (PRC) State Council, presented a carefully drafted speech to the United Nations General Assembly.¹ The assembly had convened for its sixth special session since the founding of the United Nations in 1945. Requested by the Algerian delegation, the session lasted from 9 April to 2 May 1974 and focused on the two themes of raw materials and development. The protracted Algerian War and the oil price shock of 1973 had exposed the fragility of the existing world economic system, and so-called Third-World countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America pressed the urgency of developing a more just and equal economic order. At the end of the session, the delegates agreed on two resolutions: a 'Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order' (NIEO) and a 'Programme of Action on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order'.² Transformative in scope, this economic order was never brought into existence. It nonetheless signalled the presence and voice of Third-World countries.³ Deng's speech was only one component on the session's agenda, yet it outlined socialist China's approach to international relations, political ideology and economic dependencies and contributed a markedly Chinese interpretation to conceptualizations of the 'Third World'.

Deng was the first Chinese leader to speak at a UN General Assembly since the PRC had taken over China's UN seat from the Republic of China in October 1971. Because of this, and because Deng would several years later lead the PRC into the era of 'reform and opening' and a momentous social and economic transformation, this speech has been associated closely with his person. Yet, his appointment as chairman of the Chinese delegation was rushed and not as carefully planned as later interpretations of his speech might suggest. A couple of weeks before the delegation was to travel from Beijing to New York, Mao Zedong had ensured that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would select Deng to represent China at the UN. At short notice, the responsibility for drafting the speech was transferred from the Ministry of Trade to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and it was decided that Deng would speak. Deng, with his international experience of living in France during the early 1920s, seemed a good replacement for premier Zhou Enlai who was battling cancer. With this shift to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the man responsible for drafting the speech, Qiao Guanhua, then vice-minister and soon-to-be minister of Foreign Affairs, infused a strongly political and ideological component into the text, outlining not merely an economic policy but also an international and developmental vision along the line of Mao's 'Three Worlds Theory'.⁴

The speech is not a classic example of one man's revolutionary thought, delivered to an audience and later canonized in his works. It is not a classic

revolutionary text. It is instead an example of a revolutionary concept conceived by one man, Mao Zedong; a text written by another man, Qiao Guanhua; and a speech presented by yet another, Deng Xiaoping. It gained fame by its association with the venue, the United Nations, and by its association with a crucial moment in time, 1974, the last years of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and an age of profound global realignments as part of the late Cold War, decolonization, national liberation movements and popular protests of 1968 and after. An interpretation of the speech, I argue, must account for the impromptu historical decisions that led Deng to travel to New York, for the setting in which the speech was presented, for the domestic Chinese context in which Mao thought up the Three Worlds Theory and for the international context which this theory was supposed to explain and influence. Because the ideas Deng presented at the special session were Mao Zedong's, Deng was merely a messenger. But the significance of the speech lay both in its content and in its historical symbolism as an event, in 1974 and for years after. Here Deng became China's international representative and, though it was far too early to call in 1974, positioned himself as China's future leader. As Deng's power grew following Mao's death in 1976, he eventually sought to disassociate himself from much of the content of his UN speech, while at the same time trying to profit from the symbolic status it had provided. Whereas the images of Deng at the speaker's podium below the United Nations insignia proliferated decades later, the actual speech was less frequently mentioned after the early 1980s and not included in Deng's *Selected Works*.⁵

How, then, might we interpret the above section of the speech, which formed the second and third paragraphs of a twenty-two-page manuscript? The two paragraphs outline the core components of the Three Worlds Theory and pave the way for a longer deliberation on world economic relations and development. Several points are noteworthy: strong emphasis is placed on the role of 'developing countries' and the agency of 'peoples of the world'. Deng refers to the 'old order' composed of 'colonialism', 'imperialism' and 'hegemonism', thus underlining the anti-imperialist legacy of socialist revolutionary thought. Mao's concept of a 'continuous revolution' reverberates in the mentions of 'turbulence', 'unrest', 'struggle' and the 'sharpening of basic contradictions' and these are summarized in one of the most common Chinese slogans: 'great disorder under heaven'. The 'decadent reactionary forces' are pitted against the 'emerging forces of the people' and the socialist camp is pronounced dead as 'a result of the emergence of social-imperialism'.

This was one of the key novelties in the speech. The Three Worlds Theory departed from established divisions because it no longer placed the Soviet

Union in the Second World and instead held that the Soviet Union was a 'social-imperialist' force exceeding in threat and viciousness its superpower counterpart, the United States. Rather than being bound by 'international class struggle' or by socialist allegiances, China's Third World was linked by a common stage of economic development that rendered it by comparison 'backward' and 'underdeveloped'.⁶ On this basis, 'revolution', so the speech continued, 'is the main trend in the world today' (6). Accusations that the Soviet Union promoted social-imperialism were thus an ideological response to the Sino-Soviet split of 1961–2 and the military confrontations that had occurred along the Sino-Soviet border in Manchuria in 1969.

The Chinese communist approach to revolutions and the Third World built both on foreign as well as Chinese paradigms. Harry Truman included mention of 'underdeveloped' parts of the world in his inaugural address in 1949. A few years later, French demographer and economist Alfred Sauvy coined the term Third World – '*le tiers monde*' – and it gained currency as a scientific paradigm in 1956. It described those countries that were underdeveloped, overpopulated and disadvantaged by comparison to the United States and the 'western' world, mostly Europe, which made up the First World, and the socialist bloc, which made up the Second World. At the same time, many of the newly labelled Third-World countries met at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. Though the term 'Third World' was not used in the final communiqué of the conference, the understanding was that the countries present at Bandung would each need to negotiate an identity and position between the Cold War superpowers. Increasingly, the term referred to countries that not only were economically less developed, but also did not profess allegiance to either superpower.⁷ The Third World, however, soon denoted many different things: it could be spatial, territorial, social, political or economic.⁸

Mao's concept of three different worlds was marked not by ideological differences between capitalism and communism, but by levels of economic development and imperialist might and the popular revolutionary responses these engendered. It was an extension of his previous models for international relations: the Intermediate Zone and the Two Intermediate Zones. The thesis of the Intermediate Zone developed in the aftermath of the second World War and held that the expanse of Asia, Africa and Europe stood between the two superpowers and would prevent violent encroachment of US imperialist forces. During the mid-1950s, as part of the Chinese involvement in the Bandung conference, the Chinese Communist Party promoted the so-called 'Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence'. These consisted of: mutual respect for territorial integrity and

sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.⁹ Several years later, during the early 1960s, Mao began to advocate an amended version of this thesis, delineating two intermediate zones instead of one. The first was now composed of Asia, Africa and Latin America, while European countries made up the second zone. The two zones were representative of Chinese alienation from its former Soviet 'big brother' following the introduction of policies of de-Stalinization. Although the Chinese government had promoted peaceful coexistence among African, Asian and Latin American countries, the Soviet decision to seek détente with the United States was unacceptable. Peaceful coexistence was not to apply to coexistence with the imperialist enemy. The two intermediate zones, moreover, were also a reflection of the Chinese party-state's attempt to position Chinese socialism as the vanguard of world revolutions and to promote a distinctly Chinese vision of socialist revolution, manifested most fervently in the Great Leap Forward.

Two intermediate zones, with one zone sharing in common the people's struggle against imperialism and for national liberation, led easily into the Three Worlds, as Deng delineated them in New York. In the aftermath of Sino-US rapprochement the Soviet Union had become the PRC's number one adversary. Social imperialism, a concept central to the Chinese Three Worlds Theory, provided a convenient threat to explain why countries of Mao's Third World ought to rally together. Fear of social imperialism and calls for political and economic independence were to bind together Asian, African and Latin American countries.

Unity among countries of the Third World was important not merely for China's international relations, but also for its social and political development. China's first major speech to the UN General Assembly came at a crucial moment domestically. The late Cultural Revolution was a time of heightened uncertainty following the excesses of its first years between 1966 and 1969. Mao was the ailing elder statesman, still pulling the reigns but also heavily influenced by his closest advisors (who in turn often did not agree with each other). Although he had consented to the rapprochement with the United States two years earlier, the Three Worlds Theory continued to portray the United States as an imperialist aggressor. This, in fact, would be one of the reasons why Deng distanced himself from the Three Worlds thesis during the early 1980s.

Solidarity with the Third World had been a rallying call of the Cultural Revolution. It had been popular in publications of the Red Guards and frequently included in articles of the *Peking Review*, a propaganda magazine published fortnightly in English, French, Spanish, Japanese and German. Propaganda posters featured Mao and the Chinese people walking hand-in-hand with their

Asian, African and Latin American comrades. The Cultural Revolution, in turn, had played a significant role in global popular protest movements of the late 1960s. Mao's *Little Red Book* symbolized continuous revolution and solidarity with the Third World. As the *Peking Review* commented in its special coverage of Deng's departure from Beijing airport on 6 April 1974, it was 'an atmosphere of unity in struggle'. 'Countries', so the coverage continued, 'want independence, nations want liberation, and the people want revolution.'¹⁰ This quotation had also appeared in the first speech by the Chinese ambassador to the UN, Qiao Guanhua, in November 1971.¹¹ Although Deng was going to speak on development and economic independence, to the *Peking Review* his trip was all about uniting the people in revolution, with Cultural Revolution China at the forefront.

Chinese competition with the Soviet Union for leadership of the Third World marked the 1970s. Deng's speech was a climax in ongoing Chinese efforts to support national liberation movements across the globe in the name of anti-imperialism. Eventually, the Soviets won out, mainly because the Chinese government chose to back what they believed were Third-World 'struggles' of all kinds, regardless of whether these were driven by socialist ideology. Citing principles of peaceful coexistence and non-interference, the Chinese government had not ceased its support for Chile even after the coup against Allende in 1973. During the Angolan Civil War of 1975, they had supported the same groups that eventually also received military support from the South African apartheid regime, thus greatly harming the PRC's image as a true proponent of Third-World liberation. In the quest against social-imperialism, Chinese foreign policy decisions were focused on fighting Soviet dominance first; the domestic concerns of the various struggles of Third-World countries came second. The above abstract from Deng's speech is therefore as indicative of professed solidarity with the Third World, revolution and national liberation as it is of the firm intent first and foremost to counter social imperialism.

Deng's UN speech could therefore be read in many different ways: as an attempt to rally with the Third World; as an expression of Sino-Soviet rivalry; or as an opportunity to label the People's Republic of China a 'developing country'. This label would open new avenues for international co-operation but would also provide legitimacy for the profound domestic transformations that would follow in the late 1970s under Deng's aegis. Although Deng quietly disassociated himself from Mao's Three Worlds Theory during the early 1980s, he would continue to depict China as a developing country. Deng's speech has therefore served as one of many sources in popular and scholarly attempts to evaluate the late Cultural Revolution and 'understand China'. Was China genuinely supportive

of the Third World? Or was the speech a succession of empty promises fulfilled only if it suited the PRC's own agenda? Was China a truly revolutionary leader and a committed anti-imperialist? Or had those Chinese leaders who would eventually steer the country towards 'reform and opening' already quietly moved to support economic reform and a shift away from revolutionary rhetoric?

The speech could be read as an expression of revolutionary goals or as a step towards a strategic developmental rhetoric that would mark the late 1970s and 1980s in China. Jeremy Friedman has argued that, though ultimately unsuccessful in gaining leadership of the Third World, the 'Chinese challenge changed the terms of the revolutionary conversation with the result that Moscow ultimately fought, and won, on Chinese terms'. For Chen Jian, the Three Worlds Theory 'further reduced the influence and power of the profoundly divided international Communist movement, creating another important condition for the Cold War to end with the collapse of the Soviet camp'.¹² Victories and defeats were temporary in the battle over revolutionary ideologies and terms, of which Deng's speech was one component. Revolution was part of a rhetorical strategy to participate in the international arena. But revolution could quickly give way to pragmatic policy needs, as later economic developments illustrate.

Discourses of development, linked with calls for equality, social justice, human rights and the ascendancy of the 'globalization' paradigm, soon shifted attention away from the Third World and its revolution. Yet, the idea of the Third World perseveres, partly because of habit and partly because it is closely linked to a modernization paradigm that shapes the way we think and talk about the world, even today.¹³ Deng's performance at the UN and his trip to New York have been canonized as an event, not merely as a speech that eventually became enshrined in textual form. This is not least because any discussion of Deng's trip should always conclude with a mention of the 200 croissants which he purchased during a stopover in Paris on his return to Beijing and which reminded him of his time in France as a young revolutionary.

Further Reading

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